

After Rezko verdict, ethics bill looms large on governor's desk

He says it doesn't do enough; critics say he is stalling

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The strongest campaign fundraising restrictions state lawmakers have ever approved are sitting on the desk of a governor who was elected as a reformer but now has federal investigators crawling all over his administration.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich, who pledged to reform business-as-usual while raising record amounts of political cash, has indicated he might not sign the ethics bill the legislature passed by overwhelming majorities. He says it doesn't go far enough.

But critics have questioned the Democratic governor's motives, calling the measure the best chance to change Illinois' infamous tradition of politicians raking in campaign donations from supporters who want—and often get—state business.

They say last week's conviction of Blagojevich friend and fundraiser [Antoin "Tony" Rezko](#) should bring new pressure on the governor. They also are counting on the weight of history.

"It's a historic opportunity to eliminate one of the major sources of corruption in Illinois politics," said Kent Redfield, a political science professor at the University of Illinois-Springfield.

From Chicago to Springfield, government in this state has long been viewed by some as a marketplace in which to do business, where scores of elected officials, bureaucrats and shakedown artists have gone to prison while the politicians who run things pay lip service to reform.

"When you talk about the way we do business, you are really talking about 50 years, 75 years worth of corruption," Redfield said. "Given all that long history, to get people to think about doing things differently, it's hard."

During the last three decades, Illinois governors up through and including the now-imprisoned George Ryan largely have felt that simply providing public disclosure of what they raise and spend was good enough reform. They have taken some steps, such as preventing politicians from converting campaign funds to personal use and holding fundraisers in Springfield

while legislators were in session. Campaign finance records also had to be placed on the Internet, making donations easier to scrutinize.

When City Hall contracting scandals burned Mayor Richard Daley, he voluntarily stopped taking donations from companies with city business. Still, loopholes allowed Daley to continue raising huge amounts from others seeking business and had little impact on the powerful incumbent's ability to seek re-election.

Blagojevich, the son-in-law of a Chicago ward boss, was elected in 2002 on a pledge to eliminate pay-to-play politics and insider deals.

Two years into his second term, though, federal authorities are boring deep into his administration and personal finances.

The Rezko trial and other controversies spurred lawmakers to approve overwhelmingly the measure to ban supporters who have or want major state contracts worth at least \$50,000 from giving to the politicians who dole out that business.

Now, Blagojevich faces the prospect of signing legislation that could undermine his most powerful political tool: his multimillion-dollar campaign fund, which over time has been filled by supporters who are state contractors.

Blagojevich has argued the strength of his campaign fund is what allows him to push for reform and declined to voluntarily restrict his campaign fundraising.

"You weaken yourself politically; you'll never change anything. What you're going to do is empower those forces down there in Springfield who've been part of that old way of doing business," Blagojevich said in early 2006 as he was seeking re-election.

The campaign finance bill is still not a cure-all.

It does not prohibit state contractors from donating to lawmakers or their legislative leaders, who over the years have amassed huge campaign funds and still exert great influence in who gets state business.

Other loopholes allow unlimited donations to state political party funds or political action committees, both of which could simply pass along the campaign cash to statewide officials who hand out state contracts.

But many lawmakers suspect Blagojevich's driving motivation behind the call to do more with the pay-to-play bill is a desire to block it rather than make improvements.

They underscore their wariness by pointing to how rare it has been for governors to embrace change, particularly when the governors are the focus of that reform.

Three years ago, Blagojevich vowed to "rock the system" of campaign finance in Illinois with a sweeping get-tough proposal. He never pushed it hard and the proposal went nowhere.

The proposed legislation comes as federal prosecutors have broadened their investigation into whether jobs and contracts were exchanged for campaign donations to Blagojevich.

In December, the Tribune reported that federal investigators also were examining commissions the governor's wife received as a real estate broker for political supporters, fundraisers and state contractors.

The governor and his wife have not been accused of any crimes, but the breadth of allegations arising in the Rezko trial has sent many lawmakers over the edge.

A jury found Rezko guilty of 16 of 24 counts last week in an explosive federal trial during which witnesses repeatedly said Blagojevich talked of rewarding campaign contributors.

"There is absolutely no place in government or politics for the type of repulsive and corrupt behavior that we've witnessed throughout the Rezko trial," said Sen. Jeff Schoenberg (D-Evanston). "That's why the governor should sign the pay-to-play

legislation immediately, as an initial step in addressing this problem."

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